



## Aspects of modernism

Generally accepted as the rejection of realism but with various forms of application, modernism is a complex movement to categorise. Luckily, *To Caird* is on hand to investigate further

Modernism, a late 19th and early 20th-century social and philosophical movement that was represented at practically every point on the cultural spectrum, has many definitions. Common to almost all of them, however, is the idea of a rejection of realism and with it an attempt to find a discourse capable of describing the new social, economic and political landscape born of industrialisation in Western Europe.

This was as much an ideological as a stylistic leap for most artists of the period, who felt that it was only via a complete overthrow of traditional forms of representation that the birth of new styles could be achieved. There were those however who, much to the consternation of the diehard advocates of modernism, embraced the new while continuing to practise the old.

One of these artists was the Swiss painter and craftsman Ernest Biéler, subject of a comprehensive retrospective exhibition shortly to open at Switzerland's oldest art museum, the Bern Museum of Fine Arts. Ernest Biéler - *Dreamt Reality* considers the paradox of Biéler's success as a representative of both the realist and symbolist schools. By presenting a diverse range of works from Biéler's oeuvre, including furniture, a stained-glass window and

impressionist, regionalist and Art Nouveau-influenced paintings, the exhibition is designed to show Biéler in all his breadth, and banish the narrow view that some still have of him as an artist purely interested in the folkloric.

Born in Lausanne in 1863, Biéler moved to Paris at the age of 17 to study art at the Académie Julian and Atelier Suisse. From 1892 until 1917, the artist lived and worked in Geneva, but made frequent visits to Paris, enabling him to stay up-to-date with the avant-garde art scene while still producing Swiss paintings whose realism was rooted in rural life.

This latter style – typified by scenes showing peasants at work and portraits of ruddy-faced local characters – is what Biéler is best known for, but interestingly, the only two works of the artist to be found in the permanent collection of the Bern Museum of Fine Arts are symbolist paintings. The museum bought *Les Feuilles Mortes* (1899) and *Les Sources* (1900) after Biéler himself exhibited them at the gallery, but then stopped collecting his work.

Exhibition curator Ethel Mathier was therefore tasked with obtaining almost all the works in the show from other Swiss museums and from private collections. Mathier finds the museum's past attitude to the artist's work rather curious because although Biéler was undoubtedly an accomplished symbolist painter, what gives him his special appeal is his creative success across a broad range of styles and genres, including, of course, the regionalist works that sell so well today.

According to the curator, "the symbolism was one phase among many in the oeuvre of Biéler. It's very important... but he never stopped searching for other ways to express himself stylistically". To his Paris contemporaries, Biéler may have appeared a traitor to the cult of modernism by opting to pursue his realist regional agenda alongside modernist practice, but to the contemporary viewer, Biéler provides a fascinating control by which to judge the effects of this new movement. For in his oeuvre – and in this show – we are privileged to observe both styles and are able to evaluate them by the similarities they share and the differences that distinguish them. Ultimately therefore, Biéler's decision to be both an idealist and a realist – to pursue these styles "in parallel", as Mathier says – was of benefit not just to his own career but also to art history as a whole.

**Ernest Biéler - *Dreamt Reality* is running from July 8 to November 13, 2011 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland. [www.kunstmuseumbern.ch](http://www.kunstmuseumbern.ch)**

## SIRI DERKERT

Another figure heavily influenced by modernism, at least in terms of her early cubist work, was the Swedish artist Siri Derkert, who is enjoying a major retrospective this summer. Derkert was one of 20th-century Swedish art's principal players, born in Stockholm in 1888 and one of seven children born to merchant Carl Edward Johansson Derkert. Her work ranges from fashion drawings to portraiture to public art displays, such as the murals that adorn the walls of Östermalmstorg station on the Stockholm Metro. Educated at Althin art school and then Sweden's Royal Academy of Art between 1911-1913, her studies influenced her to address themes such as feminism and the peace movement. This wide-ranging exhibition is the first Derkert retrospective held by the Moderna Museet since 1960, and is accompanied by a series of seminars on the artist. Derkert's work has as much to offer today as it did when first created.

**Siri Derkert is running from May 28 to September 4, 2011 at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden. [www.modernamuseet.se](http://www.modernamuseet.se)**

- 01 Ernest Biéler, Jeune Fille au Chapeau, 1918, © Tempéra auf Leinwand, Privatbesitz
- 02 Siri Derkert, Self-portrait, 1915, © Siri Derkert/BUS 2011
- 03 David Bomberg, The Mud Bath, 1914 © Tate



## THE VORTICISTS: MANIFESTO FOR A MODERN WORLD

Vorticism, an avant-garde British movement led by painter Wyndham Lewis and named by the modernist poet, Ezra Pound, lasted for just a few brief years (from 1914 to 1918) but produced a surprising new aesthetic that made its members the first celebrities of 20th-century British art. Set up as a British response to Italian futurism and French cubism, the vorticism movement, which also extended into the literary arena via the radical journal, *Blast*, favoured geometric imagery, bold lines and harsh colours and aimed to reflect a rapidly changing social and political world. This show features over 100 paintings, photographs and sculptures by Lewis, Jacob Epstein, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and David Bomberg.

**The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World is running from June 14 to December 4, 2011 at Tate Britain, London. [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)**